



## Gracious Assaults of Reality

*"The wealth of the rich is their strong city.  
In their imagination, it is like a high wall."  
Proverbs 18:11*

"I really have a hard time relating to your problems," the young, single mom from Central America leveled with us at one of our congregational gatherings. For Lydia, who was raped, beaten, and forced to flee her war-torn country, it was difficult to sympathize with our angst about job satisfaction, home ownership, or the quality of our child's preschool. Seeking spiritual companionship and pleased by the recreational and academic programs available to her children, Lydia was initially very drawn to our church. However, fellowship with us soon became trying, for the discrepancy between her experience of life and that of a college-educated, well-resourced congregation proved a relational chasm difficult to cross.

This gap in reality between those of us "the system" benefits and those it crushes is exacerbated when we remain ignorant of the economic and political dynamics that beget injustice in our world. Insulated by such ignorance, we fail to see, much less grieve, the fallen world that Christ came to redeem. Blind to our own complicity and spiritual impoverishment, our lives are left untransformed by the gospel. Jesus enters a needy and grieving world, but we are not there with him.

Therefore, we are learning to thank God when the stories of those we seek to serve assault our middle-class sensibilities about what life consists of. Our Salvadoran neighbors in San Francisco

have particularly opened our eyes. One fellow recently shared his grief over the plight of a neighbor back home. "My friend's farming business no longer makes enough money to feed his family," he shared. "The government recently adopted the American dollar as the official currency. But because the value of the dollar is the same as it is here, only the wealthiest in El Salvador can afford to pay for goods at U.S. prices. My friend and his family now struggle to survive."

His story shed light on the politics behind a naturalization fair sponsored a while back by the Salvadoran consulate. It took place at the church of a pastor with whom we sometimes partner. At his request, we sent some of our lawyers to help process papers for hundreds of immigrants applying for citizenship under "temporary protection status." In the foyer, Spanish-language publications were distributed. On the front cover was a photo of the Salvadoran president, Antonio Saca, and George W. Bush shaking hands and smiling, the classic pose used to communicate a political "win-win" for each of their respective countries.

Upon further inquiry, we learned that the really "big fish" in the deal was market liberalization, that is, an agreement toward laws and institutions favorable to American-led globalization in Latin America. We also learned that the president's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, had personally traveled to El Salvador to bolster public support for the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Shortly thereafter, then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met with Saca to cement cooperation around the "war on terror," as demonstrated by the fact that El Salvador remains the sole Central American nation with troops in Iraq. As one of our Salvadoran friends exclaimed, "My country is like an errand boy for the United States!"

A few years prior, several of our Salvadoran friends walked the streets in somber yet celebratory procession to

commemorate the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero. They spoke of his assassination in 1980 for speaking truth to those in power, in particular the Salvadoran military that methodically killed its own citizenry in the tens of thousands. We were reminded that this murderous campaign, carried out by the infamous "death squads," had received extensive funding and paramilitary training from the U.S. government in the service of protecting America's economic interests in the region.

Such stories are hard to hear for most American Christians, particularly for us evangelicals, for they rub against a deeply ingrained—and largely unchallenged—sense of national innocence and superiority. This is what made a recent church gathering in our area particularly remarkable. Hosted by a large and fairly wealthy congregation, the Jesus and Evangelical Power conference had the singular goal of asking Christian leaders from the rest of the world (Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East) to come and offer a brutally honest critique of American evangelicalism. With godly humility and character, the four speakers mercifully exposed ways that the American church mirrors its nation's propensity to see itself as the answer, to espouse self-serving individualism, and to define life terms of material abundance. Their ultimate warning was simply that the church, when captive to arrogance and greed, tragically negates the very gospel message she seeks to proclaim. Praise God for such loving rebuke.

Now, will we listen? ■

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